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THE FORGOTTEN TRUTH ABOUT THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

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For 100 years the British statement, which inaugurated Zionism's legitimation in the eyes of the world, has been seen as the isolated act of a single nation. The truth is much different.

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British Lord Arthur Balfour in Jerusalem in 1925. Topical Press Agency/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

On November 2, 1917, a century ago, Arthur James Balfour, the British foreign secretary, conveyed the following pledge in a public letter to a prominent British Zionist, Lord Walter Rothschild:

> His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

At the time, as World War I raged, British and Australian forces were fighting deep in Palestine against the Ottomans, and were poised to take Jerusalem.

The Balfour Declaration, for all its vagaries, constituted the first step toward the objective of political Zionism as outlined by the First Zionist Congress at its meeting in Basle, Switzerland in 1897: "Zionism seeks to establish a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under

public law." Theodor Herzl had failed to land such a commitment, either from the Ottoman sultan or from any of Europe's potentates. The declaration was the much-awaited opening: narrow, conditional, hedged, but an opening all the same.

"There is a British proverb about the camel and the tent," said the British Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann later that November. "At first the camel sticks one leg in the tent, and eventually it slips into it. This must be our policy." And so it became.

I. The Debate Over the Declaration's Meaning

Since the Balfour Declaration constitutes the beginning of Israel's legitimation by other nations, the declaration's own legitimacy has been the subject of unending attacks. This is made easier with each passing year, as the world that produced the declaration draws ever more remote. Few people today are sure why World War I was fought at all, and Britain *circa* 1917 is best known through PBS costume dramas along the lines of *Downton Abbey*. The Balfour Declaration? In the mind's eye, one imagines back-and-forth negotiations in the palaces of Whitehall and the gilded drawing rooms of the Rothschild dynasty, with white-gloved servants delivering urgent sealed missives. Surely the declaration was stirred by similarly antique passions and interests, from safeguarding England's route to India to satisfying the Christian Restorationist imperative of returning the Jews to the Holy Land.

The content of the declaration seems no less distant or downright baffling. The prominent Jewish intellectual Arthur Koestler, repeating a frequent mantra, would call it "one the most improbable political documents of all time," in which "one nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third." The fact that it included no explicit rationale for itself has also fueled the suspicion that its authors had dark or disreputable motives. After all, it was issued in the name of the largest empire in history, embracing (or, perhaps, gripping) almost a quarter of the world's landmass and population. In the guilt-sodden litany of imperialism at its apogee, the Balfour Declaration has enjoyed a certain preeminence as (in the words of the British Arabist Elizabeth Monroe) "one of the greatest mistakes in our imperial history."

The content of the Balfour Declaration seems distant or downright baffling. The prominent Jewish intellectual Arthur Koestler, repeating a frequent mantra, called it "one the most improbable political documents of all time."

The whiff of old-style imperialism also explains why some Israelis and supporters of Israel have tended to downplay the Balfour Declaration's significance. Some have tried to shift the

focus to the League of Nations mandate for Palestine, conferred on Britain in 1922, which not only incorporated the declaration but helpfully added a rationale: it was "the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine" that formed "grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country." Sixty years ago, the American lawyer Sol Linowitz insisted that by itself the declaration was "legally impotent. For Great Britain had no sovereign rights over Palestine; it had no proprietary interest; it had no authority to dispose of the land." It was only in the League of Nations mandate that "the victorious Allies in solemn proclamation recognized the prior Jewish rights to Palestine," and did so in "a formal international document of unquestionable legal validity."

Another approach to downplaying the Balfour Declaration has been to skip straight to the 1947 UN General Assembly resolution endorsing the partition of Palestine into two states. An example is a recent article by Galia Golan, a distinguished Hebrew University professor, headlined "Balfour Just Isn't That Big a Deal." Her argument: the declaration was merely the pronouncement of a "colonial power," whereas the 1947 resolution constituted "international legitimacy," conferred by "the international community as represented by the United Nations."

It is interesting, then, that the late Abba Eban, even though he played a major role in securing the 1947 resolution, thought otherwise. The events of 1947 and 1948, he wrote, "seemed to overshadow the Balfour Declaration" and "to have more revolutionary consequences." But in fact, by 1947 the Zionists could not be stopped: the Yishuv was "too large to be dominated by Arabs, too self-reliant to be confined by tutelage, and too ferociously resistant to be thwarted in its main ambition" of statehood. In 1917, by contrast, proposing the recognition of the right of the Jews to a "national home" in Palestine "was to rebel against the inertia of established facts" and against "mountainous obstacles of rationality." In Eban's view, the Balfour Declaration thus stands alone as "the decisive diplomatic victory of the Jewish people in modern history."

And so indeed it has largely been taken. The declaration has come to be remembered as either the moment of conception for Israel (and what the pro-Zionist parliamentarian Richard Crossman called "one of the greatest acts of Western statesmanship in the 20th century") or the original sin against the Palestinian Arabs (and what the Palestinian scholar-activist Walid Khalidi recently called "the single most destructive political document on the Middle East in the 20th century"). In this sense, the declaration's centennial is truly "a big deal." According to various announcements, come November, it will be celebrated by Israel, protested by the Palestinians, and "marked" by Britain.

Few of the celebrants or the protesters, however, will have much understanding of what produced the Balfour Declaration—which should not be surprising. Even historians cannot agree, which assures that almost no one who hasn't studied the history of it is likely to have a clue.

II. Chaim Weizmann's Forgotten Partners

The various views of Britain's motives need only be summarized here.

In 1916 and 1917, the Allied powers (Britain, France, Belgium, Russia, Italy, and later the United States) were locked in a devastating war with the Central powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman empire) and fearful that they might be fought to a draw. Hence the most documented explanation for the declaration is that the British government hoped to persuade Jews in two wavering Allied countries, the United States and Russia, to insist that their governments stay in the war until total victory. Jewish influence, the British thought, would tilt the debate in Washington and St. Petersburg and could best be activated by the promise of a Jewish restoration to Palestine. This was married to a (misplaced) fear that Germany might steal a march on the Allies by issuing its own pro-Zionist declaration.

To us today, this seems like a vast exaggeration of the power of Jews at the time. But British policymakers believed in what the British Zionist Harry Sacher once called "the great Jewish legend":

> That legend finds its crudest and its stupidest expression in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* [wrote Sacher], but many even of those who reject a forgery and a lie have a residual belief in the power and the unity of Jewry. We suffer for it, but it is not wholly without its compensations. It is one of the imponderabilia of politics, and it plays, consciously or unconsciously, its part in the calculations and the decisions of statesmen.

The second explanation is that the British rushed to embrace Zionism as a means of justifying their own claim to Palestine in the anticipated postwar carve-up of the Middle East. The British, as patrons of the Jews, could exclude their French ally from Palestine while claiming to champion the "self-determination" of a small people. While this explanation differs from the first, it shares with it a straightforward assumption: needing Zionism for their own ends, the British required very little prodding to produce the Balfour Declaration.

But in the collective memory of Zionists and Israelis, there is another factor: the persuasive genius of one man, Chaim Weizmann. That telling goes like this: Weizmann, famed biochemist and later head of the English Zionist Federation, managed single-handedly to win over Britain's leading politicians and opinion-makers to the Zionist idea. The Weizmann saga unfolds behind the scenes in London drawing rooms, where this Russian Jewish immigrant, having arrived in England only in 1904, succeeds in persuading—some might say, seducing—the likes of Balfour, Mark Sykes, Alfred Milner, and David Lloyd George, who would soon hold the fate of the Middle East in their hands. The Balfour Declaration is the triumph of one man's

indefatigable will, and his personal effect upon a handful of British statesmen.

Ze'ev Jabotinsky, as early as January 1918, cast Weizmann in this heroic role:

> The declaration is the personal achievement of one man alone: Dr. Chaim Weizmann. Four years of patient and calculated work established the link between us and each one of the statesmen in this country. The important people of England speak openly of his personal charm as one of the most effective factors in Zionist propaganda in England. The endorsement of Zionism by most of the Rothschilds in London is also due to his influence. . . . In our history, the declaration will remain linked to the name of Weizmann.

In the decades that followed the Balfour Declaration, Weizmann would go on to a famed career as a leader, spokesman, and diplomat of Zionism, culminating in his election as Israel's first president. In 1949, he published his autobiography, *Trial and Error,* translated over the next two years into Hebrew, German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Spanish, Italian, and a few years later French. This work firmly cemented his place in the Zionist pantheon as the man who brought forth the declaration. He died in 1952; when, in 1967, Israel celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, it issued two stamps, one depicting Balfour, the other, Weizmann.

True, when one consults the website of Yad Weizmann, the institute that houses his archives, one discovers that Weizmann was not alone: "there were additional partners in this success." Still, "the achievement is generally identified with Chaim Weizmann, who quickly became the prominent Zionist leader of his generation."

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Who were these "additional partners"? Their contribution has been largely forgotten. But when the fuller story is told, the Balfour Declaration looks very different. It is no longer a British imperial grab but the outcome of a carefully constructed consensus of the leading democracies of the day. It is no longer in tension with the principle of self-determination, but a statement made possible by the very champion of the principle. And it is no longer an emanation of secret dealings but one of the first instances of public diplomacy. It is, in short, not a throwback to the 19th century but an opening to the 20th.

The key to understanding the fuller story is this: in regard to Palestine, Britain could not have acted alone, because it belonged to an alliance. The Allied powers, especially Britain and France but also Russia, Italy, and later America, were fighting together. Their policies had to be coordinated. It would have been unthinkable for Britain to have issued a public pledge

regarding the future of territory yet to be taken in war without the prior assent of its wartime allies—especially those that also had an interest in Palestine.

This fact is entirely obscured by the Balfour Declaration's form. The letter was written on behalf of His Majesty's government and no other. The declaration was approved by the British cabinet and no other. It was signed by the British foreign secretary and no other. On the face of it, the declaration was a unilateral British letter of intent. In truth, in expressing a broad consensus of the Allies, it might even be seen as roughly comparable to a UN Security Council resolution today.

To appreciate this, it is necessary to shift the focus away from London to Paris, Rome, and Washington; and away from Chaim Weizmann to a Zionist leader now barely remembered: Nahum Sokolow.

III. Enter Nahum Sokolow

Nahum Sokolow? Most Israelis know a Sokolow Street—several older Israeli cities have one. Fewer can locate Beit Sokolow, the headquarters of the Israeli Journalists' Association in Tel Aviv, or know of the biennial Sokolow Prize, a journalism award. Scarcely anyone is aware that Sde Naḥum, a small kibbutz in the Beit She'an valley, is named after him.

But as this short list suggests, Sokolow has been almost entirely forgotten. Unlike Weizmann, no institute or memorial bears his name, no currency or stamp bears his image. He is buried on Mount Herzl, where he was reinterred in 1956, two decades after his death. Even then, an Israeli newspaper reported that "those born in Israel and the new immigrants who encountered the funeral processions, asked: 'Who is this Nahum Sokolow?'" Today, more than 80 years after his death, only a few historians remember Sokolow, and none has troubled to produce a scholarly biography.

Who then was he? Nahum Sokolow was born sometime between 1859 and 1861 in central Poland and received a traditional rabbinic schooling. But he taught himself secular subjects and soon gained renown as a prodigy, a polyglot, and a prolific writer on a vast array of subjects. In 1880 he moved to Warsaw and later assumed the editorship of the Hebrew journal Hatsefirah, which became a daily in 1886. There he contributed a popular column and wrote much of the rest of the paper, so that his fame spread with the spread of modern Hebrew. He was soon acknowledged as the world's most prominent Hebrew-language journalist.

In 1897, Sokolow reported from the First Zionist Congress and fell under the spell of Herzl. It was he who translated Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* into Hebrew and who gave it the Hebrew title *Tel Aviv,* which a few years later became the name of a new Jewish city. Leaving

daily journalism in 1906, he became the secretary general of the World Zionist Organization, which was struggling after the death of Herzl two years earlier.

Sokolow is the entry point into the fuller story of the Balfour Declaration. Indeed, at the time of the declaration, many Jews around the world gave him more credit for it than they gave to Weizmann.

Sokolow thereupon threw himself into lobbying, diplomacy, and propaganda, traveling across Europe, America, and the Ottoman empire. In 1911, he was elected to the Zionist Executive; in 1914, following the outbreak of war, he relocated to Britain, where he joined forces with the dynamic young Chaim Weizmann in the campaign to win British recognition for Zionist aims.

Sokolow is the entry point into the fuller story of the Balfour Declaration. Indeed, at the time of the declaration, many Jews around the world gave him more credit for it than they gave to Weizmann. This was partly because Sokolow the Hebrew journalist was better known than Weizmann the biochemist. As Herzl's contemporary, he was also senior to Weizmann in age and in his standing in world Zionism.

But Sokolow was also given credit because he accomplished what many thought impossible: during the spring of 1917, he secured the explicit or tacit assent of the French and Italian governments, and even of the Catholic pope, to a Jewish "national home" under British auspices. How did he surprise everyone, including Weizmann, by his achievement? Why has it been forgotten? And how might its recovery benefit the centennial retrospective on the Balfour Declaration?

IV. Britain as a Repository of Zionist Hopes

In early 1917, the Zionists had one objective. There was no doubt that the best prospects for Zionism lay in a total Allied victory over the German-backed Ottomans and the placing of Palestine under an exclusively British protectorate. Only in Britain did Zionism have sufficient support in governing circles to overcome deep-seated opposition from critics and doubters across Europe, including among influential Jews opposed to Zionism. And only Britain had the mix of strategic interests, military power, and political will to enforce its writ in Palestine.

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In the spring of 1916, Britain, France, and Russia had finalized a secret agreement to partition the Ottoman empire upon its eventual defeat. This was the "Asia Minor Agreement," commonly known as the Sykes-Picot accord after the British negotiator Sir Mark Sykes and his French counterpart, the diplomat François Georges-Picot. The agreement divided the Levant and Mesopotamia between Britain and France, along an east-west "line in the sand" from the Mediterranean to the western border of Persia. (Russia was to receive a large swath of eastern Anatolia.)

But Palestine involved so many conflicting interests that it needed a special status. According to the Sykes-Picot map, the northern Galilee would to go to France; the ports at Haifa and Acre would be allotted to Britain; and the center of the country, including Jerusalem and Jaffa, was to come under "an international administration the form of which is to be decided upon" through consultation with all of the Allies, who also included Italy and Tsarist Russia. If the Sykes-Picot agreement had been implemented, it might well have destroyed the prospects of Zionism. Weizmann later described it as "fatal to us."

Fortunately for the Zionists, David Lloyd George, who became prime minister at the close of 1916, thought that the Sykes-Picot agreement had given too large a place in Palestine to the French. Britain, after all, would do nearly all of the expected fighting and dying against Ottoman forces in the Sinai and Palestine. So Sykes was tasked with revising the Palestine portion of the Sykes-Picot accord in such a way as to leave Britain with the lion's share. The French, represented by Picot, resisted, insisting that their own claim to Palestine was at least equal to Britain's.

It was at this moment that Sykes "discovered" Zionism. "It seems at first a strange enough story," Sokolow later wrote. "A certain Sir Mark appears, he makes some inquiries, and then expresses a wish to meet the Zionist leaders. Finally a meeting actually takes place and discussions are entered upon." That meeting took place on the morning of February 7, 1917, at a private home in London. Sykes there met the foremost leaders and sympathizers of the Zionist movement: Sokolow, Weizmann, Lord Walter Rothschild, James de Rothschild, and Herbert Samuel. From the record of that meeting, it is clear that Sykes held out the prospect that Britain might grant the Zionists some form of recognition—on condition.

"France," he told them, "was the serious difficulty. . . . The French wanted all Syria and [a] great say in Palestine." Sykes proposed that the Zionists approach Picot in order to "put the Jewish views" before him and "convince" the French. Some of the Zionists in the room resisted the idea, arguing that Britain should do the work, but Sykes thought otherwise. James de Rothschild finally replied that Sokolow was "the proper person" who could "speak for the

Russian Jews also." Sykes agreed to introduce Sokolow to Picot the following day.

Why was Sokolow "the proper person"? Harry Sacher, a protégé of Weizmann who was present at the London meeting, later characterized Sokolow's advantages:

> Sokolow was the diplomatist of the Zionist movement, the diplomatist of the school of the Quai d'Orsay [the French foreign ministry]. His handsome appearance, his air of fine breeding, his distinguished manner, his gentle speech, his calculated expression, his cautious action, his well-cut clothes, his monocle, were faithful to a tradition which perhaps is not so highly honored as before the war. . . . Diplomats and ministers felt that he belonged to their club, spoke their language, and was one of themselves. He practiced their art and was entitled to their privileges.

Sokolow made the impression of a statesman, albeit one without a state, and this went beyond his prodigious mastery of European languages. One admirer attributed his diplomatic finesse to his being "a European through and through, internally as well as externally, in his Weltanschauung and manners. . . . He shined in the presence of Woodrow Wilson, Paul Painlevé, George Clemenceau, and Arthur James Balfour."

And while Sokolow represented no state, Europe's leaders saw in "this little bent Jew," still bearing Russian nationality, an authentic spokesman of the Jewish masses of Russia and Poland, who could move them in the desired direction by the power of his words. He seemed to personify what Sacher called "the great Jewish legend," as a cosmopolitan leader of the "great Jewry" to which Sykes and others attributed a vast, subterranean influence.

V. Sokolow Goes Forth

And so Sokolow went forth—first to engage with Picot in London, then back and forth to Paris, with an unexpected detour to Rome, all in close coordination with Sykes. It was a daunting mission. Sokolow's task was to persuade the French not just of the feasibility of the Zionist project but also of the virtues of a British protectorate over Palestine. On the face of it, both propositions should have seemed preposterous to the French. Zionism enjoyed little support among French Jews, and the French had already been promised a share of Palestine equal to Britain's in the Sykes-Picot accord (the details of which Sykes had kept secret from Sokolow and Weizmann).

Yet Sokolow managed not only to disarm suspicion of the Zionist program; he even succeeded in extracting statements of support. Most books on the Balfour Declaration do devote a chapter to the story. (Prime instances: Leonard Stein: "Sokolow in Paris and Rome." Isaiah

Friedman: “Achievements in Paris and Rome.” Ronald Sanders: “Sykes and Sokolow in Paris and Rome.” Jonathan Schneer: “Sokolow in France and Italy.”) With a nod of acknowledgment to them all (and apologies for some simplification), here is a quick summation of Sokolow’s achievements.

After two preparatory meetings with Picot in London, Sokolow headed for Paris. In two separate rounds of talks (punctuated by a trip to Rome), he thrice met Jules Cambon, secretary-general of the foreign ministry and one of the great French diplomats of the day, and the second time around had an audience with Prime Minister Alexandre Ribot. To Picot in London, Sokolow had expressed an open preference for British protection, and Picot pushed back. So in Paris he instead emphasized the feasibility of the Zionist project and how it animated Jewish opinion in Russia and America.

Two leading historians of French policy, Christopher Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, described this revised approach as “more diplomatic, more conciliatory, and more misleading.” The French expressed a general sympathy for Zionism, but Sokolow then had the bold temerity to ask for it in writing. And he received it. On June 4, 1917, Cambon issued him a letter (on the prime minister’s authority), which not only anticipated the Balfour Declaration but cleared the way for it.

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The Cambon letter, almost as forgotten as Sokolow, was addressed to him and is worth quoting in full:

> You were good enough to present the project to which you are devoting your efforts, which has for its object the development of Jewish colonization in Palestine. You consider that, circumstances permitting, and the independence of the Holy Places being safeguarded on the other hand, it would be a deed of justice and of reparation to assist, by the protection of the Allied Powers, in the renaissance of the Jewish nationality [*nationalité juive*] in that land from which the people of Israel were exiled so many centuries ago.
>
> The French government, which entered this present war to defend a people wrongly attacked, and which continues the struggle to assure the victory of right over might, can but feel sympathy for your cause, the triumph of which is bound up with that of the Allies.
>
> I am happy to give you herewith such assurance.

As Weizmann's biographer Jehuda Reinharz has noted, the Cambon letter "in content and form was much more favorable to the Zionists than the watered-down formula of the Balfour Declaration" that followed it. The French accepted a rationale in terms of "justice" and "reparation," and acknowledged the historical Jewish tie to the land. The letter bound Zionism to the cause of all the Allies, and made no reference at all to the rights of non-Jews.

"The Quai d'Orsay had been skillfully and decisively outmaneuvered" by Sokolow, according to Andrew and Kanya-Forstner. "The Zionists now had a written assurance of French support. France, however, had neither any assurance of Zionist support nor any prospect of obtaining one." The French obstacle to a possible British declaration had been neutralized.

"Our purpose," explained Sokolow, looking ahead, "is to receive from the [British] government a general short approval of the same kind as that which I have been successful in getting from the French government." On arriving back in London, he deposited the Cambon letter at the Foreign Office, where it stimulated a spirit of competition. British officials who sympathized with Zionism now urged that Britain "go as far as the French."

It was not only the Cambon letter that Sokolow secured during his continental sojourn. "Yes, yes, I believe we shall be good neighbors!" These words, spoken to Sokolow by Pope Benedict XV on May 4, 1917, thoroughly departed from the previous Catholic approach to Zionism. The visit to Rome had been urged upon Sokolow by the French and facilitated by Sykes. They had hoped that he might win over the government of yet another ally, Italy. But the Catholic Church was no smaller prize: it claimed rights to holy places all over Palestine and maintained, as a matter of theology, that the Jews had been dispersed as punishment for their refusal to accept Jesus as messiah. In 1904, Herzl had met with Pope Pius X, who told him in no uncertain terms that "the Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people." "*Non possumus*"—we cannot.

Yet Sokolow had an amiable meeting with Benedict, in which the pontiff described the return of the Jews to Palestine as "providential; God has willed it." (Sokolow wrote up the exchange verbatim.) Sokolow assured the pope that the Zionists would respect the Vatican's immemorial rights over the holy places, and the pope offered reciprocal assurances. The Italian government also gave Sokolow an assurance of its goodwill and sympathy. The Zionists in London hadn't expected Sokolow to go to Rome or, when he did, to gain an audience with the pope. Only weeks earlier, Weizmann had written to Lord Rothschild that "I am afraid the Catholic influence is asserting itself very strongly and is obscuring the political issues." When Weizmann heard of the outcome at the Vatican, he congratulated Sokolow on his "brilliant result."

At that point, Britain had pledged nothing, so Sokolow could be forgiven for informing Weizmann, from Paris, that "we have achieved here no less—and maybe more—than in your country [England] where we have been working for nearly three years." In the months that followed, Weizmann and Sokolow worked in tandem with Sykes to close the gap and elicit a

British declaration of support building on Sokolow's achievements on the continent. The history of these efforts has been researched and analyzed in great depth. Here, too, Sokolow played a major role, drafting numerous documents, including the proposed formula for the declaration submitted by the Zionists to Balfour. It was Sokolow who coined the phrase "national home."

But a crucial portion of the story unfolded not in London but in Washington. For just as Britain would never have moved on Palestine without the prior consent of its European allies, so it would not have acted without the agreement of President Woodrow Wilson. In April 1917, the United States declared war on Germany (although not on the Ottomans), making itself a major player in the anticipated post-war settlement. One more ally had to be persuaded before Britain could move.

Here, too, Sokolow had an effect, if only because he had recruited Louis D. Brandeis to the cause. This occurred during a whistle-stop visit by Sokolow to America right before the war, in March 1913. Sokolow, Weizmann later reminisced, was "on the alert for new men—and he found them. He was the Columbus, so to speak, who discovered Louis D. Brandeis." And it was Brandeis, whom Wilson named a Supreme Court justice in 1916, who led the campaign to gain an American buy-in to a British declaration. Brandeis was kept fully in the picture about developments in Britain and on the continent; as Sokolow later wrote, "the negotiations in political circles in England and France were known in America, every success was welcomed there with enthusiasm, and often, also, received further support."

The American policy establishment was entirely hostile to Zionism: the Zionist idea seemed impractical, and missionary interests opposed it. On the first ask, in September 1917, Wilson had withheld his approval. Only the second time around in mid-October, when Wilson received the proposed text from London, did he change his mind. "I find in my pocket the memorandum you gave me about the Zionist Movement," he wrote to his trusted foreign-affairs adviser, Col. Edward House. "I am afraid I did not say to you that I concurred in the formula suggested by the other side [Britain]. I do, and would be obliged if you would let them know it." House did so, discreetly—even Wilson's secretary of state wasn't informed.

VI. The Crucial Moment

"The support of the British government, when given, will be in conjunction and agreement with the Allied powers." So announced Weizmann at a Zionist conference in May 1917; as he well knew, it could not have been otherwise. If the French, the Americans, or perhaps even the Italians had thrown cold water on the Zionist project, that would have broken the momentum in London, leaving the Zionists without a British declaration. And so the triumvirate of

Sokolow, Weizmann, and Brandeis left nothing to chance. Thanks to their efforts, when the crucial moment came in the British war cabinet, Balfour could claim the assent of the Allies: "Mr. Balfour then read a very sympathetic declaration by the French Government which had been conveyed to the Zionists, and he stated that he knew that President Wilson was extremely favorable to the Movement."

The Cambon letter proved indispensable. The historian Isaiah Friedman, who probably weighed more evidence than anyone, believed that without it "there would have been no Balfour Declaration." (Balfour reportedly said the same to Sokolow.) As for Woodrow Wilson's assent, the British war cabinet had insisted upon it; without it, as the diplomatic historian Frank Brecher noted, the Balfour Declaration "almost certainly" would not have been issued. Weizmann called it "one of the most important individual factors in breaking the deadlock created by the British Jewish anti-Zionists, and in deciding the British government to issue its declaration."

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Despite appearances, then, the Balfour Declaration was more than the chess move of a single power. Behind it stood the Allies, each of whom gave it some push forward. And when Balfour finally issued it, no one doubted that the Allies stood by Britain's side. Just after publication of the declaration, the *Jewish Chronicle* of London affirmed that the British government had acted "in accord—it is without doubt to be assumed—with the rest of the Allies." The *Zionist Review* described the declaration as "formal public recognition by Great Britain (and, that is, by the Allies) that Israel as a nation lives and persists."

Stephen Wise, chairman of the Provisional Zionist Committee in New York, knew all of the inside details of how Sykes and the Zionists had canvassed for Allied "votes." "It may be assumed," he hinted, "that Britain is not acting alone."

> It is not for us to predicate that England has spoken and acted in concert with her Allies, but we are justified in believing that England, ever working in closest cooperation with her Allies in the war, will in the day of peace find herself not only supported by France and Italy, but above all by the American government and people.

VII. Collecting Endorsements

The British issued the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917. But the Zionists understood perfectly well that the Allies would have to be consulted once more on the "day of peace," and that Palestine as a "national home" for the Jews would be contested. The Balfour Declaration thus opened another chapter, in which the Zionists worked to persuade each Allied government to endorse it openly.

Here, too, Sokolow played the lead on the continent, and it was no small task. The French had cooled; America was now well in the war, and Russia (after the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917) was out, so Jewish opinion in both countries no longer mattered much (assuming it ever had). And there had been a change of government in France since the Cambon letter. In January and February 1918, Sokolow returned to Paris, this time with the aim of securing a public French declaration in support of the Balfour Declaration. There he met with the French foreign minister Stephen Pichon, an old friend, who assured him that nothing had changed in France's position since the Cambon letter.

But Sokolow asked for a formal statement: an explicit French endorsement of the Balfour Declaration. American Jews would appreciate it, Sokolow assured Pichon, and this would help France at the peace conference. So Pichon delivered an endorsement, and it was published on February 10, 1918. Pichon affirmed that "the understanding is complete between the French and British governments concerning the question of a Jewish establishment in Palestine (*un établissement juif en Palestine*)." Sokolow was not satisfied with this phrase, which fell short of the "national home" (*foyer national*) mentioned in the Balfour Declaration. So he pleaded with Pichon to use that phrase; on February 14, Pichon sent Sokolow another letter that did just that.

The Zionists collected other endorsements, some outright, some with emendations. The most important came from Italy and Japan—the two states that, along with Britain and France, would participate in the San Remo conference and become permanent members of the Council of the League of Nations. In May 1918, the Italian government pledged to Sokolow to help "facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish national center (*centro nazionale ebraico*)." In January 1919, Japan informed Weizmann that "the Japanese Government gladly take note of the Zionist aspirations to establish in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people and they look forward with a sympathetic interest to the realization of such desire." (Similar endorsements came from Siam and China, the other two then-independent states of East Asia.)

Last but not least, in August 1918 Woodrow Wilson sent a letter to Stephen Wise expressing "satisfaction in the progress of the Zionist movement . . . since the declaration of Mr. Balfour," whose text Wilson repeated in its entirety. Wise announced that "the conjecture of some," that the Balfour Declaration "commanded the President's approval," had now been "established as a certainty for all."

Between his secret endorsement in October 1917 and his public one in

1918, Woodrow Wilson introduced a new principle in international relations: self-determination.

Between Wilson's secret endorsement of October 1917 and this public one, Wilson had introduced a new principle in international relations: self-determination. "National aspirations must be respected," said the president in his "self-determination" speech of February 11, 1918. "Peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent." From that point onward, critics of the Balfour Declaration would insist that it had denied self-determination to the majority-Arab population. But how could facilitating the Jewish "national home" violate Wilson's principle, if Wilson himself (as Lloyd George put it) was "fully committed to the Balfour Declaration and was, in fact, an enthusiastic supporter of the project it involved"? Wilson's endorsement eased any Allied doubt as to whether the Balfour Declaration conformed to the new rule of the international order.

The Zionists brought of all these endorsements to the peace conference in Paris in February 1919. Sokolow opened the Zionist presentation at the conference before the foreign ministers of Britain (Balfour), France (Pichon), the United States (Robert Lansing), Italy (Sidney Sonnino), and Japan (Makino Nabuaki). In the era before the United Nations and the League of Nations, there existed no higher international forum than this.

In his preface, Sokolow spoke of the Balfour Declaration as though it had been made by *all* of the Allies:

> In the midst of this terrible war, you, as representatives of the Great Powers of Western Europe and America, have issued a declaration which contained the promise to help us, with your goodwill and support, to establish this national center, for whose realization generations have lived and suffered.

In Sokolow's carefully chosen words, the Balfour Declaration had morphed into the Allied declaration. A monumental effort in many capitals had permitted him to utter that sentence without fear of contradiction.

The San Remo conference in April 1920 was an extension of the peace conference. One of its tasks was to parcel out former Ottoman territories into mandates, which the powers would administer as trusts on behalf of the League of Nations. There the powers agreed that Britain would receive the League of Nations mandate for Palestine.

But what would it be mandated to do? Would it be charged with facilitating the "national home"? The Balfour Declaration, if introduced into the mandate, would become part of international law. Absent that, there would be no legal standing to the "national home." Britain, at Zionist urging, sought to have the entire Balfour Declaration inserted in the text of the mandate, and it was here that Sokolow's 1918 efforts in Paris were richly rewarded.

Since Sokolow's triumph in Paris, there had been another change of government in France, and the French had grown intransigeant. The lead French negotiator, Philippe Berthelot, "knew not Joseph," and attempted to exclude the Balfour Declaration from the mandate on the grounds that it was an "unofficial declaration made by one power, which had never been formally accepted by the Allies generally." In particular, it "had never been officially accepted by the French government."

Lord Curzon, Balfour's successor as foreign secretary, replied that Berthelot "was possibly not fully acquainted with the history of the question." He then produced Pichon's letter to Sokolow and had the interpreter read it aloud. One "could hardly say that M. Pichon was unaware of the significance of the declaration," Curzon observed, adding that Pichon "had not only endorsed, on behalf of his own government, Mr. Balfour's declaration, but had added in his letter: 'besides, I am happy to affirm that the understanding between the French and British government on this question is complete.'"

A flailing Berthelot countered that "it was not in any way evident that M. Pichon had accepted the whole declaration in its entirety." But it certainly sounded as though he had. In the end, Pichon's endorsement could not be undone. Berthelot retreated, and the Balfour Declaration entered whole into the preamble of the League of Nations mandate—at which point it acquired full legal standing in international law. The "national home" for the Jews in Palestine had become a legal commitment of the international community. The Allied powers made Britain "responsible for putting into effect the declaration originally made on November 2, 1917, by the Government of His Britannic Majesty, and adopted by the said Powers."

VIII. The Weakness of Secret Pledges

The Balfour Declaration has often been weighed against an earlier set of promises: in 1915 and early 1916, Britain made various pledges to Sharif (later King) Hussein of Mecca, leader of the Arab Revolt, in a series of Arabic letters known as the Hussein-McMahon correspondence. In the letters, the British promised Hussein that they would support Arab independence within certain borders—at the very least in Syria and Mesopotamia, and possibly in Palestine. How was it that the Balfour Declaration became international law, while the Hussein-McMahon correspondence ended up a dead letter? Answer: there was no Arab Sokolow.

Once Hussein had his secret pledges from the British, he made little effort to extract comparable commitments from other Allies. In particular, Sykes tried to press Hussein's son Faisal to act as Sokolow did and come to some understanding with the French over Syria. McMahon had included a key reservation—namely, that the territories promised for Arab independence were only those "in which Great Britain is free to act without detriment to

interests of her ally France." As France's interests in Syria (and Palestine) were well-known, this should have been a powerful incentive to the Arabs to reach a thorough understanding with the French. But Hussein and Faisal never did, and Faisal came to the peace conference in 1919 without any French chits.

Not only that: his British chits had been given secretly. At the peace conference in Paris, Lloyd George invoked the British commitments to Hussein as though they were binding on France. Pichon objected: "This undertaking had been made by Great Britain alone. France had never seen it until a few weeks before [this conference]." Lloyd George countered that France "had for practical purposes accepted our undertaking to King Hussein." Pichon: "How could France be bound by an agreement the very existence of which was unknown to her?"

Pichon was exaggerating France's ignorance, but because the Hussein-McMahon correspondence was secret, knowledge of it could be denied. Faisal had entered a collision course with France, which in 1920 occupied Syria by arms and threw him out of Damascus. Given French determination to rule Syria, a clash would have been difficult to avoid, but the absence of an Arab Sokolow in Paris made it inevitable.

No less significant, McMahon's secret pledges were meant for Hussein's eyes only. They weren't publicized to the Arabs until long after the war. The Balfour Declaration was something entirely different: a pledge to an entire people, given before all the world. This was only partly obscured by the vehicle of the declaration: the letter addressed by Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild for conveyance to the (English) Zionist Federation. But the letter was no more than a convenience, and Sokolow made light of it at a dinner on November 15, 1917 at which Lord Rothschild read the Balfour Declaration. Sokolow quipped that it had been "sent to the Lord and not to the Jewish people because they had no address, whereas the Lord had a very fine one."

The Balfour Declaration anticipated what later came to be called public diplomacy. The Zionist movement had no use for secret pledges of the sort Britain gave to the Sharif Hussein of Mecca.

The Balfour Declaration thus anticipated what later came to be called public diplomacy. The Zionist movement had no use for secret pledges of the sort Britain gave to Hussein. As Herzl insisted at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, the movement sought "publicly legalized guarantees" since anything less "could be revoked at any time." Herzl took a dim view of "secret interventions" and called for "free and open discussion subject to constant and complete monitoring by world public opinion." The aim was to produce a public assurance by any government with control or a say over Palestine, and have it incorporated in public law.

In this aspect, Sokolow, a journalist like Herzl, was Herzl's truest disciple. It was Sokolow who coined the Hebrew term *hasbarah* ("explanation"), a word that perfectly parallels public

diplomacy in its modern sense. Sokolow saw *hasbarah* as the natural form of Zionist advocacy in the chancelleries of Europe, in editorial boardrooms, and in public speeches.

"We are not conducting any secret diplomacy," he said in a London speech in mid-1917. "Such a thing is obviously impossible for the Jewish people. The Zionist leaders are endeavoring to make clear to the powers the aspirations of the Jewish people." In 1919, he insisted that "in the whole proceedings there are no secret treaties, no secret diplomacy, in fact neither diplomacy nor conspiracy; but they constitute a series of negotiations, schemes, suggestions, explanations, measures, journeys, conferences, etc."

While Sokolow may have seemed like a diplomat, even to professional diplomats, he thought like a publicist, eager to get the story out. He took every assurance he received and made it public. Sokolow saw no point in discretion for discretion's sake. In mid-1917, he told a London audience that he and Weizmann had been "abundantly successful" in winning over the French and British governments, that "our success with the Italian government transcended all of our expectation," and that Pope Benedict had given him "the warmest assurances of his sympathy." (News of Sokolow's audience with the pope spread so widely that it gave rise to a joke: two Jews find themselves in St. Peter's Square, where they see two figures standing on the papal balcony. The one Jew asks the other: "Who's that next to Sokolow?")

Wilson explicitly asked that his prior approval of the Balfour Declaration not be made public, and it wasn't. But the Zionists publicized every other assurance. This had the dual purpose of spurring competition among the Allies and raising the morale of rank-and-file Zionists. But above all, an open assurance, communicated to a vast public, could only be retracted at a cost.

Indeed, had the Balfour Declaration been issued as a secret letter to Zionist leaders without having been cleared by the Allies (that is, like the British promises to Hussein), it would have never entered the preamble of the mandate, and Britain probably would have disavowed it in the 1920s. In 1923, in light of growing Arab opposition, a new British government did order a review of Palestine policy. Could the Balfour Declaration be abandoned? The review committee (under Lord Curzon) noted that the declaration had been "accepted, not indeed without some reluctance, by the whole of our Allies, that it met with especial favor in America, that it was officially endorsed at San Remo, that it figured in the original Treaty of Sèvres, and that it was textually reproduced in the mandate for Palestine, which was officially submitted to and approved by the Council of the League of Nations in July 1922." Under those circumstances, it was "well-nigh impossible for any government to extricate itself without a substantial sacrifice of consistency and self-respect, if not of honor."

The British would no doubt have had far fewer qualms about violating a secret pledge made only to the Jews. A public pledge that had been cleared and then seconded by the Allies was another matter. Britain wasn't yet prepared to sacrifice honor on *that* scale.

IX. Why Sokolow Has Been Forgotten

How is it that the true nature of the Balfour Declaration has been obscured, so that it is remembered solely as a product of British imperial will? Why does no other government "mark" the centennial? (Apropos, June 4 marked exactly a century to the Cambon letter.) Why has Israel itself failed to remind Washington, Paris, and Rome of their crucial roles, perhaps prompting them to express their own pride in the decisive assurances they gave in 1917?

Selective memory is the answer. It is easy enough to understand why the British would prefer to forget that they needed the prior approval of Allies (the French, no less!). Initially, the British wanted the gratitude of the Jews for themselves. Later, when Zionism became a burden, they wanted the exclusive prerogative to downgrade the "national home" in any way they chose, without being second-guessed (by the Americans, of all people!). Even today, Britons ridden by imperial guilt over the Palestinians want the privilege to wallow in it alone. Britain, in this view, has a unique obligation to "set things right"—a remote echo of past imperial hubris.

But surely it is incumbent on Israel to remember the Balfour Declaration for what it was: the carefully calibrated consensus of the nascent international community *circa* 1917. Why has Israel forgotten?

There are two reasons. First, when Britain became the mandatory power in Palestine, Zionism fixed its political action almost exclusively upon London. After the peace settlement, sympathy toward Zionism dissipated in France, Italy, and the United States, and the Vatican reverted to its traditional hostility. Britain became almost the sole support of Zionism. Weizmann spent the interwar years tirelessly reminding Britain of its obligation to foster the "national home," with steadily diminishing results. His desperate strategy was to present the Balfour Declaration as thoroughly British, having emanated entirely from the depths of Britain's own supposed tradition of "gentile Zionism."

Sokolow, too, wrote a polemical *History of Zionism* in two volumes, published in 1919, designed to convince British readers that the Balfour Declaration capped centuries of the English love of Zion. The possibility that France or Italy or the United States, for a moment's lack of enthusiasm, might have nipped the whole thing in the bud couldn't be admitted.

But there was a second, pettier reason. Weizmann wanted full credit for the Balfour Declaration. To secure it, he and his associates had to cut out of the story all those parts in which he didn't star. That included Sokolow's diplomacy on the continent, which was a solo performance.

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The story of Weizmann and Sokolow, and Weizmann *versus* Sokolow, could fill a much longer essay and has yet to be told. Suffice it to say that every aspect of Sokolow's role in 1917 brought the tension between them close to the surface. In his autobiography, Weizmann described Sokolow as lacking "practicality." "He had no idea of time," claimed Weizmann, "or the meaning of a practical commitment." Sokolow also allegedly suffered from an "over-diversification of opinions and convictions," and "was always in favor of compromise"—a dangerous trait, in Weizmann's book.

These elements of distrust emerged strongly when Sokolow accepted the mission to Paris. Weizmann disliked the very idea of him darting about the Quai d'Orsay, even under the watchful eye of Sykes. In particular, Weizmann suspected, erroneously, that Sokolow might buy success in Paris with concessions to the French in Palestine, encouraging them to press for a standing equal to Britain's. "Your work in France," Weizmann warned Sokolow, "may be interpreted as negotiations on behalf of our movement in favor of France. On no account [is] such [an] impression admissible."

Weizmann ended that missive by demanding that Sokolow return to London. For his part, Sokolow dismissed the notion that his mission might encourage French ambitions as "pure imagination." "Either you have not received my letters," he wrote to Weizmann, "or you have not had time to go through them." Sokolow remained on the continent for a full six weeks, working alone and in tandem with Sykes.

No one could argue with the results: Sokolow had performed beyond anyone's expectations. According to Jehuda Reinharz, Weizmann had "underestimated Sokolow's skills as a diplomat." But of course Weizmann did not fail to put the assurances made to Sokolow to good use in Britain, and even stretched them when it served the cause. "Our friend, chief, and leader, Mr. Sokolow," he announced in a speech to the English Zionist Federation on May 20, 1917, "has been both in France and in Italy, and from both these governments he has received assurances of full sympathy and full support."

Full? Not exactly. And this: "We have assurances from the highest Catholic circles that they will view with favor the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine." This was an elastic interpretation of Pope Benedict's words to Sokolow.

Then, once the Balfour Declaration was issued, Weizmann reversed gears, and it became his habit to minimize Sokolow's achievement. Sokolow himself offered an explanation in 1918, after his return from Paris where he had secured Pichon's endorsement of the Balfour Declaration:

> In our offices [in London], I found Weizmann and reported to him the results of my effort in Paris. I can't resist the impression that he is not sincere, and that ambition eats him whole. It seems to me that he increasingly forgoes calm and objective consideration, and instead operates out of personal motives, which arise from his anxiety. He is very suspicious, fears rivals, and brooks no opposition. I showed him the French document. He said, that's very fine, but I felt he saw it as some sort of competition.

The American Zionist leader Stephen Wise later wrote that a "deep abyss" opened up between Sokolow's and Weizmann's versions of how the Balfour Declaration came to be. Weizmann's wife Vera alluded to this in her memoirs in recalling a Zionist congress convened in the early 1920s. Some of the delegates, she remembered,

> were rather jealous that one man from the little [Russian] village of Motol [Weizmann's birthplace] should have secured the Balfour Declaration. The Polish Jews in particular felt like this since they would have preferred Nahum Sokolow, the father of the Hebrew press, to have been the initiator of the Declaration. To smooth over their ruffled feelings, Schmarya Levin, who was never at a loss for words, told the story of two Jews who were arguing as to which was more important—the sun or the moon. At length they decided that the moon was more important: the sun gives light in the day-time, when it is light out anyhow, whereas the moon gives light when it is dark!

Partisans of the two men lined up, and it wasn't necessarily along the Polish-Russian divide. Lewis Namier (originally from Poland), a British historian and an admirer of Weizmann, dismissed Sokolow as a "little Jewish *faktor* [sales agent] now raised to the level of pseudo-statesmanship." Reubin Brainin (originally from Russia), a publicist and an admirer of Sokolow, claimed that "it was Sokolow, perhaps more than Weizmann, who won the sympathy of prominent British Jewish figures theretofore indifferent to Jewish national aspirations in Palestine."

Into the 1930s, Sokolow's disciples still claimed the Balfour Declaration as his achievement. But Sokolow did practically nothing to promote his version. Vain he may have been, but he never got around to writing his memoirs, even of the events leading up to the Balfour Declaration. According to his son, Sokolow made notes and even started filing material, but he died in 1936 without having written anything.

Weizmann, by contrast, told his version many times. In his *Trial and Error,* he devoted this single sentence to Sokolow's diplomacy: "Sokolow was entrusted with the task of modifying the attitude of the French, and of winning the consent of Italy and the Vatican—a task which he discharged with great skill." (This, while admitting that "the chief danger always came from the French.") One of Weizmann's sharpest critics detected a pattern: "The most conspicuous feature of Dr. Weizmann's appraisal of Nahum Sokolow are the omissions. In

many phases of Zionist history the latter played an important role, to which no reference is made in *Trial and Error.*"

The historian Mayir Vereté wrote that "it is not easy to decide whether [Weizmann's] share was greater than that of Sokolow" in securing the Balfour Declaration. That assertion has been contested by Weizmann's biographers (although one, Norman Rose, has admitted that Sokolow's contribution was "often overlooked in the wake of Weizmann's achievements"). But the question is not whether Sokolow has received less than his due. Until a biographer researches Sokolow as thoroughly as others have researched Weizmann, there cannot be an answer. The problem is that the forgetting of their partnership, perhaps the most consequential in the history of Zionism, didn't only erase Sokolow from memory; it erased awareness of the Allied antecedents of the Balfour Declaration. The earliest Zionist success in mobilizing international legitimacy became a story of collusion between a wily British Jew and a clutch of British imperialists.

X. Britain's Retreat from the Declaration

For two decades, Weizmann led the Zionist struggle to hold Britain to its promises, to close what he recognized as "the gap between the promise of the [Balfour] declaration and the performance." But by the late 1930s, Britain was in full retreat from the declaration; in the British White paper of 1939, Zionists saw its final abrogation. The White Paper, which informed British policy throughout World War II, blocked Jewish immigration to Palestine at precisely the moment when the Jews of Europe faced destruction. Britain attempted to set Palestine on a course to become an Arab state with a Jewish minority.

As the sun set on Britain's support for Zionism, Weizmann argued that Britain hadn't the right to discard or even interpret the Balfour Declaration on its own. Why? Not because its text had appeared in the preamble of the League of Nations mandate. By 1939, the League was in tatters. Instead, Weizmann cited the World War I commitments made to Zionism by the *other* Allies. Britain had the "moral right" to rule Palestine only because the "civilized nations of the world" had conferred it "for the explicit and direct purpose of helping to build up the Jewish National Home." And these nations did so because of Zionist exertions.

> Did not the British government of the time—1917-18—encourage us, the late lamented leader Sokolow, myself, and other friends who were working in the cause of Great Britain and Palestine, to go to France, Italy, America, and plead—I do not exaggerate this contribution—that the mandate should be given to Great Britain? We were encouraged to do it. We were encouraged to bring in our people. We were encouraged to pour out all that was best in us because we trusted in the word of

Britain; that was for us the rock on which we were to build in Palestine.

The Balfour Declaration did not legitimate Zionism. It was Zionism, through its diplomatic efforts, that legitimated the Balfour Declaration.

Thus did Weizmann, at his lowest ebb, admit the true character of the Balfour Declaration. It had not legitimated Zionism. It was Zionism, through its diplomatic efforts among "civilized nations," which had legitimated the Balfour Declaration. Not only had its issuance depended on the tacit or explicit agreement of the Allied powers, but that agreement had been secured by the Zionists themselves—by Weizmann, Brandeis, and, above all, by the lamented but forgotten Sokolow.

XI. Time to Fix the Distortions

The centennial of the Balfour Declaration is the perfect opportunity to chip away at the distorted accretions of a century. The largest of these is the notion that the Balfour Declaration arose outside any legitimate framework, as the initiative of a self-dealing imperial power. This is utterly false. The Balfour Declaration wasn't the isolated act of one nation. It was approved in advance by the Allied powers whose consensus then constituted the only source of international legitimacy. Before Balfour signed his declaration, leaders and statesmen of other democratic nations signed their names on similar letters and assurances. The Balfour Declaration anticipated a world regulated by a consortium of principal powers—the same world that, 30 years later, would pass a UN resolution legitimating the establishment of a Jewish state.

This centennial is thus the time to remind governments of their shared responsibility for Britain's pledge to establish a Jewish "national home" in Palestine. In Washington, Paris, Rome, and Vatican City, it is important for Israel's ambassadors and friends to speak openly of the historic and essential role of each government in the gestation of the declaration. The same should be done in all of the capitals that endorsed the Balfour Declaration after its issuance, but before it was enshrined in the mandate. That would include Beijing and Tokyo.

The American role deserves particular emphasis. Few Americans know that Wilson approved the Balfour Declaration in advance, or that this approval had a decisive effect in the British cabinet. The United States never entered the League of Nations, and so never ratified the mandate. But in June 1922 the United States Congress passed a joint resolution (the so-called Lodge-Fish resolution) that reproduced the exact text of the Balfour Declaration ("the United States of America favors the establishment in Palestine," etc.). President Warren G. Harding

signed the resolution the following September. The centennial is a unique opportunity to remind the American public of these facts, all of which point to America's shared responsibility for the Balfour Declaration.

The main commemoration will take place in Britain, and here it is imperative that Israel and its friends insist on a full accounting of Britain's record. The past months' attempt by the Palestinians to force Britain to "apologize" for the Balfour Declaration has already failed. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas demanded such an apology several times over the past year, most notably in a speech at the United Nations, where he cited "the catastrophes, misery, and injustice this declaration created." In April, the British government informed the Palestinian Authority that it "does not intend to apologize":

> We are proud of our role in creating the state of Israel. . . . Establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in the land to which they had such strong historical and religious ties was the right and moral thing to do, particularly against the background of centuries of persecution.

Proud Britain may be, but Israel cannot forget that in May 1939 the British unilaterally abrogated the Balfour Declaration, shutting down Jewish immigration to Palestine. This act had no legal foundation. The Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations concluded that the White Paper "was not in accordance with the interpretation which, in agreement with the mandatory power and the Council, the commission had always placed upon the Palestine mandate." Not only did Britain freely reinterpret the "national home" so as to preclude a state, but Britain even denied that it meant a haven. So Britain barred Europe's Jews from entry to their legally recognized "national home," and Jews perished in the millions.

If the 1917 Balfour Declaration is now to be deemed a source of British pride, its 1939 abrogation should be deemed a source of British shame.

The subject of Britain and Europe's Jews during the Holocaust has been researched thoroughly. "Within the [Holocaust's] greater circle of tragedy," wrote one historian, "there was a smaller one": namely, Britain's determination to keep desperate Jewish refugees out of Palestine by every possible means. This must not be forgotten when Israel's prime minister arrives in London to "mark" the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. Yes, this will be a chance to strengthen bilateral relations. No, an apology is not demanded. But if the Balfour Declaration is now to be deemed a source of British pride, its revocation should be deemed a source of British shame.

And what of the other claim, that the Balfour Declaration disregarded the Palestinian Arabs? Balfour was not ignorant of objections to Zionism. Its critics, he said in a 1920 speech, invoked the principle of self-determination, claiming that if applied "logically and honestly, it is to the

majority of the existing population of Palestine that the future destinies of Palestine should be committed." Balfour thought there was a "technical ingenuity" to this claim.

> But, looking back upon the history of the world, upon the history more particularly of all the most civilized portions of the world, I say that the case of Jewry in all countries is absolutely exceptional, falls outside all the ordinary rules and maxims, cannot be contained in a formula or explained in a sentence. The deep, underlying principle of self-determination points to a Zionist policy, however little in its strict technical interpretation it may seem to favor it.

This should be read as the codicil to the Balfour Declaration. The Cambon letter spoke of "justice" and "reparation," Pope Benedict cited "providence," the mandate preamble mentioned "the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine." These were all attempts to contain, in a formula, that which Balfour said no formula could contain. The poetic simplicity of the Balfour Declaration resides in its presumption that a home for the Jews in their land needs no justification. "How goodly are thy tents," the declaration proclaims. A century later, it still does.

ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT Mosaic

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION WAS MORE THAN THE PROMISE OF ONE NATION

https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/israel-zionism/2017/06/the-balfour-declaration-was-more-than-the-promise-of-one-nation/

By affirming the right of any Jew to call Palestine home, it also changed the international status of the Jewish people.

June 28, 2017 | Martin Kramer

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This is a response to *The Forgotten Truth about the Balfour Declaration*, originally published in *Mosaic* in June 2017

In 1930, the British Colonial Office published a "white paper" that Zionists saw as a retreat from the Balfour Declaration. David Lloyd George, whose government had issued the declaration in 1917, was long out of office and now in the twilight of his political career. In an indignant speech, he insisted that his own country had no authority to downgrade the declaration, because it constituted a commitment made by all of the Allies in the Great War:

Sara and Benjamin Netanyahu view the Balfour Declaration at the British Library. Government Press Office Israel.

> In wartime we were anxious to secure the good will of the Jewish community throughout the world for the Allied cause. The Balfour Declaration was a gesture not merely on our part but on the part of the Allies to secure that valuable support. It was prepared after much consideration, not merely of its policy, but of its actual wording, by the representatives of all the Allied and associated countries including America, and

of our dominion premiers.

There was some exaggeration here; not all of the Allies shared the same understanding of the policy or saw the "actual wording." But Lloyd George pointed to the forgotten truth that I sought to resurrect through my essay. In 1917, there was not yet a League of Nations or a United Nations. But, in the consensus of the Allies, there was the nucleus of a modern international order. The Balfour Declaration had the weight of this consensus behind it, *before* Balfour signed it. This international buy-in is also why the Balfour Declaration entered the mandate for Palestine, entrusted to Britain by the League of Nations. Those who now cast the Balfour Declaration as an egregious case of imperial self-dealing simply don't know its history (or prefer not to know it).

Nicholas Rostow does know it, and we should be grateful for the efforts he has made to inform wider audiences about the legal foundations of Israel. "It is not just that ignorance of the past can lead to unnecessary policy error," he writes. "As we know all too well from UN resolutions and opinions of the International Court of Justice, such oblivion, willed or not, can and in this case emphatically does lead to gross injustice."

Of course, some of this ignorance and oblivion is indeed deliberate. Consider the way in which Britain "forgot" its own understanding of the Balfour Declaration. In 1922, an earlier British "white paper" interpreted the declaration in light of postwar conditions. Its key determination was that the Jewish people "should know that it is in Palestine as of right and not on sufferance." The mandate then interpreted the declaration to mean that the country's nationality law should be "framed so as to facilitate the acquisition of Palestinian citizenship by Jews who take up their permanent residence in Palestine."

The Balfour Declaration may or may not have implied a Jewish state, but by affirming the right of any Jew to call Palestine home, it changed the status of the Jewish people. There was one small spot on the globe in which Jews had a natural right to take up abode, by virtue of their "historic connection." (The Balfour Declaration thus anticipated Israel's own "Law of Return" of 1950, guaranteeing that "every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*.")

In issuing yet another "white paper" in 1939, the British took the *opposite* position. That document stipulated that after a five-year period of reduced immigration, "no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it." The Jewish right had disappeared; Jews would henceforth be in Palestine on (Arab) sufferance.

The British justification? Between 1922 and 1939, the British had admitted 300,000 Jews to Palestine, and Jews now formed a third of the population. Wasn't that enough?

At that time, there were 9.7 million Jews in Europe. Six years later, six million of them were dead, and even then the British were determined to keep the remnant out of Palestine. They reasoned that if the Jewish proportion was held to a third of the population, the Jews would never be able to found a state. And so the British "forgot" their own determination of 1922, that the Jewish people was in Palestine "as of right."

In the end, a third of Palestine's population, comprising 600,000 determined Jews, was enough to found Israel even in the teeth of pan-Arab opposition and British hostility. The act of reminding, with which Rostow credits me, should be commended to Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been invited to London by Theresa May, the British prime minister, to "mark" the Balfour centennial. Netanyahu should be sure to link the history of 1917 to that of 1939. The former is a noble chapter; the latter, a shameful one.

Allan Arkush supplements my essay with a valuable appraisal of the possible motives of Britain, France, Italy, the United States, and the Vatican in the crucial year of 1917. Historians who have plumbed the relevant archives have debated these motives, sometimes reaching a consensus, more often not. Support for the Zionist project rested upon a range of considerations, although the predominant one plainly seems to have been self-interest. And yes, Arkush is right that these calculations were made in the midst of war by leaders, not by peoples.

But in no way does this diminish the Balfour Declaration. International legitimacy derives from international politics, with all its contradictions and compromises. UN General Assembly resolution 181 of 1947, which called for the partition of Palestine and a Jewish state, would never have passed if Josef Stalin hadn't put the full weight of the Soviet Union behind it. Why he did so is a fascinating story, but it's irrelevant to the legality of the decision. Nor did the subsequent record of the Soviet Union, combining vicious anti-Semitism with support for Israel's enemies, diminish by a whit the international legitimacy of the resolution the Soviets had supported.

Trade-offs undoubtedly affected the calculations of the principal Allied powers in 1917. Some clearly had to do with the preservation or extension of empire. Yet what is astonishing is that all of these powers somehow converged in opening the door to Zionism. This included not just such traditional rivals as Britain, France, and Italy, all of which had empires, but the United States, which championed self-determination, and even the Vatican, which historically was no more sympathetic to the Jews than was Stalin. This is what makes international legitimacy potent: so many stars must align for it to take hold at all.

Arkush is also certainly right that the "down-to-earth" motives behind the Balfour Declaration no longer speak to some of the citizens of the democracies that endorsed it a century ago. He proposes an emphasis on another, presumably deeper motive behind the declaration: the

long-standing Protestant Christian idea of restoring the Jews to Palestine. Balfour and Wilson seemed to have imbibed that idea, as had many members of the British cabinet. Stressing it, Arkush argues, might endow the Balfour Declaration "with greater legitimacy in the eyes of some of today's readers." No doubt this is true, and it is telling that the biggest planned commemoration of the Balfour Declaration, scheduled for the Royal Albert Hall this coming November 7, is the initiative of Christian Zionists.

Yet this supposed lineage is precisely one that Israel's critics also emphasize. I am fresh from an academic conference in which a well-known authority on Israeli "settler-colonialism" gave a paper on "A Century of Balfour Declarations," cataloguing the fervent plans for restoring the Jews to Zion that cropped up in 19th-century Britain. The Israel-defamer Ilan Pappé has similarly given a lecture devoted entirely to this notion, and drawing this conclusion: "A simple history of ideas leads us directly from this Christian Zionist movement of the 19th century to the politicians of the 20th century who would implement these ideas as they would be articulated in the Balfour Declaration." (And for him, the declaration is "the ultimate act of British perfidy.")

In intellectual and academic settings, this emphasis is obviously meant to cast the Balfour Declaration as the romantic excess of Bible-steeped salvation-seekers. Clearly this spin relies for its success upon liberal revulsion at evangelical Christianity. But whatever one thinks of it, attributing the Balfour Declaration to Christian restorationism isn't likely to validate it for anyone who isn't already an enthusiast of Israel, and of a certain kind.

But as Arkush recognizes, I also don't think much of it on purely historical grounds. First, no hard evidence proves any such "direct" link. One Israeli historian has complained that "accounts of Christian Zionism often read like a dot-to-dot drawing, connecting Lord Shaftesbury, George Eliot, and Laurence Oliphant with some of their lesser-known contemporaries, only to reveal, in due course, a neatly-sketched draft of the Balfour Declaration." In fact, restorationists "were continuously associated with charges of religious enthusiasm, eccentricity, sometimes even madness." Restorationism lurked on the fringe; no respectable Edwardian gentleman would have subscribed to it.

Second, since the opening of the archives, it's clear that all of the British players reasoned in very "down-to-earth" terms. They debated Palestine just as they debated Egypt and India. "As official records show," argued the historian Isaiah Friedman, "sentiment did not determine policy." Jon Kimche titled his book on the Balfour Declaration *The Unromantics* for just this reason. The declaration, he concluded, was "a strictly functional and unromantic bargain with the Zionists."

Colin Shindler returns to the question of the role of personalities in the gestation of the Balfour Declaration. My rediscovery of Nahum Sokolow seems to have fascinated many

readers. After the Great War, word of Sokolow's diplomatic deeds spread across the Jewish world, often in exaggerated form. This was attested by the novelist and playwright Sholem Asch in 1923:

> In the ancient prayer houses of the land of Poland, in the twilights between the afternoon and evening prayers, the young men used to sit near the stove and tell stories about Sokolow, about his journeys to the royal courts, about his encounters with emperors and princes, and with the Pope, all of whom loved to converse with him and hear him express in 70 tongues his wisdom and his learning, and consulted with him how to govern their peoples. And Sokolow, in his sagacity, pointed them toward the right path, told them against whom to conduct war and with whom to make peace, never omitting an opportunity to be an advocate on behalf of his fellow Jews.

At the time Asch wrote this, Sokolow was the subject of as much legend as was Chaim Weizmann, if not more. I agree with Allan Arkush, who describes as "shocking" the lack of a scholarly biography of Sokolow. But Zionist (and Israeli) leaders often have been remembered and celebrated for reasons that go beyond their impact on history.

One reason is that they have talented disciples determined to "cherish" their memories by publishing critical editions of their papers, establishing institutes bearing their names, and settling old scores along the way. Weizmann had such a disciple in Meyer Weisgal. Vladimir Jabotinsky, whose role Colin Shindler emphasizes, had one in Joseph Schechtman. And both leaders wrote autobiographies. It's unthinkable that the wartime actions of Weizmann or Jabotinsky could ever be forgotten. Shindler himself is laudably engaged in uncovering new aspects of Jabotinsky's contribution, as he has done in his response to me.

Sokolow had no associate of this caliber. His most devoted disciples were his daughter Celina and his son Florian. Celina, who acted as his personal secretary and physician, kept his London house as a shrine to him for decades after his death, refusing to send his massive archives to Israel because its government would not establish a special institute to house them. (She thought it should be situated facing the Knesset.) She finally surrendered the papers and letters to the Central Zionist Archives, but there are no critical editions of anything. Florian, a journalist, wrote a readable if unscholarly biography. It was a poor substitute for the autobiography Sokolow never wrote.

But another reason is just as substantial. There needs to be some present purpose to remembering. Weizmann and Jabotinsky, like Herzl and Ben-Gurion, left legacies. Their lives continue to be read as parables. Admittedly, for historians, the maintenance and repair of the historical record is its own reward, but what can we point to in the actions of Sokolow in 1917 that has a claim on Zionist and Israeli collective memory?

First, his accomplishment is a reminder that it is neither wise nor prudent for Israel to rely on

a single friend. Had Sokolow not secured the assent of other powers in 1917 for the hoped-for British declaration, it would not have come about. And had he not returned to regain their approval in 1918, it would not have become binding international law. It is always crucial to "work" the great capital—London in 1917, Washington today. But a diversified diplomacy also aggregates the power that resides in other centers around the globe. Such aggregation gave Zionism the Balfour Declaration, the UN partition plan, and Security Council resolution 242. Absent it, Israel or its actions may yet be robbed of their international legitimacy, especially if the "unshakable bond" with its great friend begins to unravel.

Second, the Sokolow story is a reminder that in the diplomacy of a nation, there is no substitute for true men and women of the world. Sokolow happened to have a gift for languages, which eased his way across Europe and America. This versatility was a source of wonder and strength. (And of this amusing anecdote: Sokolow, on a visit to America, appeared before an audience of immigrant Jews and asked them which language he should use for his speech: Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Polish, German, English, or French? "Give it in French!" someone shouted. "The others we already know.")

But proficiency in many languages (Italian and Spanish could be added to the list) would not have sufficed. The Zionist activist Shmaryahu Levin wrote this assessment of Sokolow in his memoirs:

> Had Jews possessed a state of their own, Sokolow would have been its most distinguished diplomat. From his early manhood he displayed those gifts and talents which are commonly looked for in the higher international diplomacy. His bearing, his social approach, his manner of speaking of and around matters, his very dress, distinguished and festive, marked him as one born to shine in the "big world." Among all the Jews I have met, or whom I have had the occasion to observe, there is not one who approaches Sokolow in his character of the synthesis of Europeanism—not even among the Jews of Western Europe. They, at most, were polished Frenchmen, Englishmen, or Germans. Sokolow was Europe itself.

The Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann, who traveled with Sokolow, characterized him as a shapeshifter: in conversation,

> he had an amazing capacity for adjusting to his partner. Talking to a ḥasidic rabbi he turned into a Ḥasid; dealing with a French statesman he became a charming *bel esprit,* and, as somebody once said half in jest and half in malice, conferring with the Pope he became a Catholic.

For a man who began life as an observant *yeshiva bokher* in a provincial Polish town, he traveled an astonishing distance. In 1918, while in Paris, he confided to his diary: "I know all the departments of Downing Street and the Quai d'Orsay better than I knew, back then, the *beit midrash* of Plock," the town on the Vistula where he spent his childhood.

The challenge for modern Israel is to identify those of its young citizens who show the potential to travel just as long a road as Sokolow's, and then open it before them. Restoring Sokolow as a role model might help.

As November approaches, we will see signs of unease among liberal supporters of Israel, who have been persuaded that the Balfour Declaration bears the stigma of empire. Critics of Israel cite it "as evidence for their allegations that Israel is a colonial cancer in Southwest Asia," laments one pro-Israel Jewish student, who concludes that it should not be commemorated at all: "When we allow Israel to be labeled a product of the widely hated British Empire, we surrender both our agency and our purpose."

But why allow Israel to be so labeled? As I've shown, the Balfour Declaration was a pledge made by Britain to the Jewish people on behalf of the Allies, including the United States. In the League of Nations mandate, the establishment of a Jewish national home formally became an international legal obligation, entrusted to Britain for implementation. Arthur Koestler was wrong: the Balfour Declaration wasn't only the promise of "one nation." Sweeping the Balfour Declaration under the rug would simply be a surrender to partisan distorters of this history. But since Palestinians and their friends won't leave it under the rug anyway, why not simply teach the truth about it? The purpose of my essay was to promote just that.

But the centennial should not be marked only as a milestone in Israel's legitimacy in the world. It was also a turning point in the standing of Zionism among the Jews. A wave of euphoria swept the Jewish world, from New York and London to Kiev and Odessa. "After November 1917," wrote Isaiah Friedman, "Jewry was never the same again. . . . The Zionists had won a tremendous victory. Henceforth, they became the central and most dynamic force within Jewry."

That couldn't have been said after the first Zionist congress in 1897. But with the Balfour Declaration, world Jewry entered the Zionist era. We owe the most poignant expression of this to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the reviver of modern Hebrew. He left instructions as to how the year of his death should be recorded on his tombstone. The inscription reads that he died on "26 Kislev, Year Six to the Balfour Declaration."

This is the Jewish world we still inhabit today. The British later faltered in their adherence to the Balfour Declaration, as did many of the Allies who first backed it. The Jews did not, and they kept its promise.